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THE CONCEPT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

WE have come to operate very freely with the concept of the "unconscious." The justification of its use is taken to be a self-evident fact. Unfortunately, it is this matter-of-course attitude towards the concept that keeps us from becoming clear in our minds as to what is really meant by it and in how far its usage is justifiable. The loose and undetermined nature of its meaning is threatening to become disastrous in its usefulness. This state of affairs has been accentuated by the fact that the concept "unconscious" has been taken up and applied to their own needs by the cultural sciences,—by anthropology, sociology, and culture history. The result is that the concept, already vague in psychology proper, acquires ever new shadings of meanings as its application is widened to the study of cultural phenomena. In order to bring order into this chaos it is incumbent upon the various sciences to determine precisely the limitations of the concept as they are demanded by the specific character of the problems. The problems of individual psychology which have given occasion to introduce the "unconscious" are decidedly not the same as those which bring about its employment in ethnology. Why, then, use the concept as an undifferentiated something which every theorist may apply according to his own sweet will? On the following pages I should like to suggest certain lines of thought along which the concept of the unconscious may gain in individual psychology a more strictly scientific determination. These suggestions are intended to be methodological and, therefore, aim in the direction of a philosophical arrangement of the concept within the general system of conceptualizations in psychology. For, what is methodology but the attempt to bring into a systematic structure of logical relations the various concepts with which a science operates?

The problems which in individual psychology led to the introduction of the "unconscious" arose as soon as the attempt was made to bring the different elements of our psyche into causal relations comparable to those of the natural sciences. It was found that the temporal succession of many ideas, emotions, or volitions could not be converted directly into a causal relation without assuming the operation of certain intermediary psychic processes. Their existence was "assumed," as they did not seem to be "conscious." The factor x thus introduced was the realm of the unconscious. Every psychic phenomenon came now to be classed either as conscious or as unconscious. Instead of one realm of the psychic there now existed two, of which, however, the one was a *terra incognita*. As a result, the land of the unconscious became the playground of psycho-

logical theories. They naturally thrived well in the ill-defined jungle of the unconscious. The most conspicuous theory of this kind in vogue to-day is that of the psycho-analysts. I regard it as a significant fact that just these theorists, whatever the value of their empirical data may be, have contributed almost nothing to the conceptual determination of the unconscious. The proper plausibility of their theoretical structure is conditioned by the assumption of a *terra incognita*. Into it they can conveniently banish all psychic phenomena which they regard as unamenable to an interpretation of the conscious. If popular psychologizing is content with this method, we can expect from science that it strive towards an interpretation by clearly defined terms.

A vague and undefined concept is mischievous in every science, but especially so in psychology. On account of their very nature the phenomena of this science are ever in danger of being interpreted figuratively. In that case a metaphor passes as an explanation. A classical example of such a type of psychological interpretation is the conception of the mind as a *tabula rasa* on which the ideas make impressions as the stylus on wax. On account of such metaphors psychology is ever threatened by the abyss of popular psychologizing. The notion of the unconscious is the most prolific metaphor that has as yet arisen in psychology. Nothing could be more stimulating to the imagination than the realm of the unconscious as the *Nibelheim* where the dark current of the repressed libido flows. Is it not from here that the mists rise and becloud the horizon of the conscious? They would indeed shroud it in eternal darkness, if it were not for the salvation by the psycho-analytic Siegfried.

The psycho-analyst—and the same applies to similar theorists—conceives the unconscious as a realm outside of the conscious. The line of thought is that, since consciousness is synonymous with psychological experience, only the conscious, but not the unconscious, can be conceived in terms of that experience. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider a causal relation between the realm of the unconscious and that of the conscious. Phenomena in the former determine phenomena in the latter. The puzzling problem that thus arises is that the conscious which is subjectively experienced is causally determined by the unconscious which is outside of the experienced. This antithesis is solved by the theorist of the unconscious by introducing a metaphor. The unconscious is thought of as radiating certain forces that influence consciousness like mechanical agents. Is such a conception not on the same level as was the idea of the *tabula rasa*?

This leads us to a methodological principle that is fundamental for a consideration of the unconscious. It is obviously incorrect to

interpret the relation of the unconscious to the conscious in any other than homogenous terms. But as consciousness is by definition subjective experience, it follows that in an interpretation of the unconscious in its relation to the conscious the unconscious must likewise be conceived in terms of conscious experience. My thesis, therefore, is that the unconscious must be understood out of the conscious. A similar line of thought has led Wundt to deny the existence of the unconscious altogether. He defines the soul as the aggregate of all experiences of consciousness. If this definition is accepted, it is absurd, according to Wundt, to speak of the unconscious. I believe that this is absolutely true as far as it goes; however, it does not seem to me to be the whole truth.

I think it is quite feasible to attribute to the concept of the unconscious such a meaning as to give it a definite place within our terminology of subjective experience. This meaning must be gained from introspection, as consciousness only exists from this point of view. From the absolutely objective point of view of behaviorism a distinction between the conscious and the unconscious is a *contradictio in adjecto*.

Instead of conceiving the unconscious as a psychic realm outside of and contrasting with the realm of the conscious, it would seem to me that the unconscious is simply a special phase of the conscious. More precisely stated, the conscious is the fundamental concept, while the unconscious is its limiting concept. No idea is entirely conscious. That part of an ideational complex which is at a given time in the center of attention appears to be conscious in the strictest sense of the word. But, as even the most superficial self-analysis reveals, there are many additional elements in the complex that are not in the focus of attention, but are nevertheless "felt." These are the elements that give to the idea its specific affective¹ setting. No idea is free from such a milieu, not even the most abstract one. When we see the picture of some person well known to us, our attention may be directed at the moment to a certain facial expression of this person. But the visual picture that arises is inherently combined with an affective tone determined by all sorts of associations. These associations refer to the most varied experiences in connection with the person in question. The elements originally in the center of attention will not remain there, but are soon replaced by elements which have hitherto been in the affective fringe of the complex. In the example cited above the image of the facial expression may be

¹ I use the term "affective" as referring to the subjective forms of feeling or to the experiences of the so-called "inner sense." It stands in contradistinction to "ideational" which refers to the "objects" of mental apprehension. The term "affective tone" which I use so often in this paper, is the subjectively experienced coloring of a psychic complex.

superseded by the memory of a certain eventful meeting we may have had with this person,—one of the elements that determined the affective milieu of the first idea. This event is recalled and its details are brought into definite relations with one another. Thus the new idea gains plasticity. I should like to call this process of generating an idea one of psychological amplification. The purport of this term consists in the fact that one idea does not really “replace” another one, but that in the continuity of psychic life the new idea becomes something qualitatively different from what it previously was. The idea is evolved out of a special feeling, or, as I should like to call it, out of an affective tone. It is an essential part of my argument that the amplification is not a conflict of different ideas and the final victory of one of them—for this would again be a metaphor of popular psychology—rather a psychological metamorphosis of the affective to the ideational. Beyond this transformation psychology can not go; it is part and parcel of the dynamics of psychic life and must be taken as an ultimate and irreducible phenomenon of subjective experience. It is demonstrable only in strictly psychological terms, that is to say, in terms of immediate psychological experience.

The affective tone is normally experienced as the psychological effect of some former experience, and the process of amplification consists, consequently, in expanding the “feeling” of this experience to an idea of it. This makes clear the intrinsic conceptual connection between amplification and memory. The affective tone is representative of, but psychologically not equivalent to, the “ideational memory” of a former experience.

An affective tone, as we have seen, is a potential idea. When it is actualized, that is to say, amplified, we speak of an act of memory. Wherever this takes place it is quite superfluous to introduce into our psychological terminology the concept of the unconscious. But the situation at once changes when we deal with an affective tone that can not be amplified into an ideational image of the experience represented. For it is not at all essential that the actualization of the potential idea take place. Of the psychological factors that determine the affective setting of an idea some are more readily amplified into new ideas than others. To return to our example of the picture of a well-known person, one affective tone may represent a vivid idea of an eventful occurrence associated with this person and may be amplified with great ease, while another one may refer back to some remote experience and can be amplified into an ideational image only with the greatest effort of our attention. Finally there are affective tones that can not be amplified at all. These are the ones that are of special interest to us from the point of view of the “unconscious.”

The central thesis I should like to formulate is that in all cases of so-called unconscious processes we are really dealing with an affective tone which can not be amplified into an ideational image of the experience represented. The dynamic metamorphosis of the affective to the ideational is for some reason inhibited. The non-actualized affective tone refers back to a specific experience in exactly the same way as does an act of memory. It is called unconscious because its subject-matter is not visualized in the form of an idea.

The objection that will be made to this assumption is that inasmuch as I am attempting to define the unconscious in terms of the subjective experience of consciousness, it is inconsistent to assume a causal relation between a non-actualized affective tone and a past experience since the actualized idea alone could give us a conscious experience of this relation. It will be pointed out that even if there be affective tones that do not become amplified, they could not be used for the purpose of interpretation as they are not experienced in consciousness as being representative of specific past experiences. In other words, it will be objected that I introduce an extra-conscious element into a terminology that pretends to be exclusively one of subjective experience. This objection would indeed be valid if our psyche were something static, that is to say, if our ideas could be studied like impressions on a *tabula rasa* or like fossils in a geological deposit. It is the dynamic nature of the psychic life that makes it possible to draw inferences from the conscious concerning the nature of the unconscious.

The existential relation of a non-amplified affective tone to a specific experience can be inferred from different points of view. First, as already stated, there is a continuous gradation in the ease with which different affective tones may be amplified into their respective ideas. The introspectively experienced approximation of this series towards a point where the amplification is zero makes the assumption of the existence of this point itself a logical postulate. Secondly, those cases where the process of amplification extends over an appreciable length of time are comparable to the cases of zero-amplifiability. For subjective experience both types of phenomena are moment for moment similar or even identical and are often only distinguished by the ultimate breaking in of the ideational image in the former case. This breaking in from this point of view may be regarded as epiphenomenal. Thirdly, a concrete demonstration of a non-amplified affective tone is possible in all those cases where the process of amplification is brought about in a quasi-experimental way and is conditional upon the introduction of a specific sense-perception.

Let me cite for this last type of demonstration an example from

my own psychological experience. I have been under the effect of anesthetics several times and on each occasion I experienced very painful hallucinations while losing consciousness. These hallucinations consisted in very vivid visual and acoustic perceptions and were of exactly the same nature in each case. While I still experience a marked affective tone of pain when recalling the external circumstances that were associated with the anesthesia, it is quite impossible for me to amplify this tone into a clear idea of the subject-matter of the hallucinations. But this state of incomplete amplification, which obviously is related to so-called unconscious experience, at once changes into a clear ideational image of the specific hallucinations when I perceive the slightest smell of ether. The faintest perception is sufficient to cause this effect. The theorist who adheres to the idea of a separate psychic realm of the unconscious would speak in this case of an idea "rising above the threshold of the conscious." I see no reason for introducing such an idiom into our terminology, since the above phenomenon differs in no essential respect from the amplification of any affective tone into an idea. What makes it seem novel is simply the fact that the abnormal nature of the anesthetic stimulus makes it possible to analyze it out of the specific psychic complex more readily than is the case with the causation of ordinary affective tones. The so-called unconscious nature of the process consists in the fact that the affective tone which represents the past experience—or more correctly speaking a certain part of the experience associated with the anesthesia—can not be amplified into an idea without a reintroduction of the original stimulus.

There is no reason to doubt that a process of amplification is brought about in innumerable instances of every-day life by the accidental introduction of relevant stimuli. Thus, for instance, the perception of a certain spoken word may bring a vivid ideational image of a past experience to our mind, an experience which may already have determined a specific affective tone before the introduction of the stimulus. The situation may be such that an analysis may reveal at once the specific word that acted as a stimulus for the process of amplification, but at the other extreme it may be quite impossible for introspective analysis to discover the stimulus in the complex. In either case the phenomenon is only relatively different from the hallucinations referred to above, inasmuch as we are dealing with normal and inconspicuous stimuli instead of exceedingly uncommon ones.

It must be remembered that the affective tones that are amplified into ideas may be of a more general or of a more specific character.

The latter type is naturally more likely to be more conspicuous in our subjective experience. The more general they are the more easily may they be overlooked in introspection. Thus it is not possible to infer that an idea was not preceded by any affective tone at all from the fact that we can not recall such a specific psychological setting out of which the idea was amplified. It would seem that in such cases an affective tone did exist and was actually experienced, but can not be determined by our analytical introspection on account of the general character of the affective tone in question. Our whole line of argument on this subject is necessarily characterized by the fact that we constantly move within the border-area between demonstrable and inferential evidence, inasmuch as our limiting concept, the unconscious, must be inferred indirectly from the demonstrable conscious experiences.

A fruitful field for the study of the psychological processes in question is offered by an analysis of the recollections we have of our dreams. They are recalled with varying degrees of vividness. Sometimes we have very plastic images of them. But often a subtle self-analysis reveals mental states in which a dream is represented by an affective tone that is not at all or only partially amplifiable into an idea of the subject-matter of the dream. Such affective tones usually fade away very soon after awaking. Sometimes one can even experience a rapid decrease in the degree of amplifiability just after awaking from a vividly experienced dream. A phenomenon of unusual interest is sometimes experienced for a few moments after a light sleep when the persisting affective tone is a feeling that what has just been dreamt was in some way familiar to us, that we had experienced it at some previous occasion, while it is, however, quite impossible to attain an ideational image of the "familiar" incidences of the dream.

Very likely many kinds of psychopathic phenomena must be interpreted in a similar way. For instance, persons who have acted upon a suggestion received in a state of hypnotism state that they were prompted by a certain feeling that they must act in that particular way, but they are unable to recall ideationally the experience of which this feeling is representative. The psychological abnormality of such a hypnotic phenomenon appears to consist in the inability to amplify an affective tone which under normal circumstances would have developed at once into an idea. The phenomenon itself, however, is in no way peculiar. Our every-day life is replete with situations of the same type. It is the demonstrability of the sequence of cause and effect that happens to make the hypnotic suggestion and the consequent determination of volition appear striking and unique.

The various interpretations of psychological phenomena I have given in this paper must be regarded merely as examples illustrative of my line of argument. Whether or not all of these interpretations will prove to be correct is rather immaterial. What I have attempted to do is to suggest a type of interpretation that would be logically consistent from an epistemological point of view. We can not interpret the conscious and the unconscious from two entirely distinct points of view. In order to gain the unity of perspective necessary for every scientific method of interpretation, I have postulated that the unconscious is part and parcel of consciousness, and that the one must be interpreted in the light of the other. The notion of a separate realm of the unconscious is a monstrosity of popular psychology.

HERMAN K. HAEERLIN.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

PHILOSOPHY AND EDIFICATION

THERE was a time when philosophy was unique in the college curriculum. It was depended upon to lend dignity to the work of the senior year and had about it something of the aspect of an Initiation into the Mysteries. It was taught by the chief executive of the institution as his especial and cherished prerogative, and, as he was almost invariably a minister of the gospel, the philosophical studies involved "Christian Evidences" almost to the point of evangelism. All this is undoubtedly obsolescent. The renaissance, having gradually gathered strength for four centuries, is at last penetrating even our institutions of learning, and the most treasured relics of medievalism are doomed relentlessly to eventual oblivion. It is amazing in how short a time what was once genuinely sacred has come to seem grotesquely sanctimonious. But now the pendulum is swinging high in its opposite arc and philosophy is adjured in the name of its intrinsic dignity to renounce all function of edification and to pursue its abstract goal in the unruffled calm of disinterested and dispassionate thinking. In some quarters the squeamishness on the subject has become so acute that a man scarcely dares speak above a whisper lest he should seem to be an advocate, nor to be in earnest for fear of seeming to be dogmatic. It is entirely possible, too, that such may be the typical attitude of philosophy in the future. But it is also possible that that latter state would be worse than the first. At least, one begs to think that philosophy should be slow to repudiate entirely its traditional service and responsibility.

No doubt the present revolt against all "inspirational" efforts in philosophy is primarily a protest against intellectual dishonesty